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## Rhino poaching

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# A STITCH IN TIME MAY SAVE RHINOS

281\*



\*RHINOS POACHED BY 31 JULY 2012. WHAT ARE YOU DOING ABOUT IT?

\*\*NUMBER CORRECT AT THE TIME OF GOING TO PRINT.



Jon Morgan

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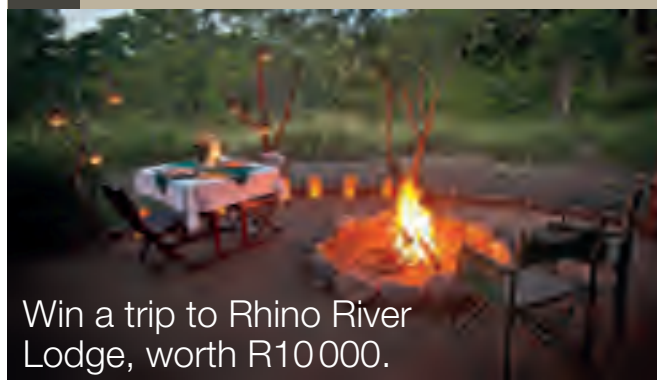
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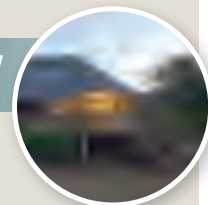
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# OUR RHINO WAR

Just beyond the view of the game drives, breakfast braais, cafeterias and thatched cottages of one of the world's greatest game reserves is a shooting war with a mounting body count. It's driven by greed, cruelty, a folk fallacy and unbelievable amounts of money. On its outcome rests the future of rhinos as a species – and South Africa's conservation reputation.

By Don Pinnock





Chad Crooking







Mitchell Kroger



## BATTLING ON THE BRINK

The state of rhino populations as listed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature

### JAVAN RHINO

Fewer than 50 (critically endangered, possibly extinct)

### SUMATRAN RHINO

Fewer than 200 (critically endangered)

### BLACK RHINO

4838 (critically endangered)

### GREATER ONE-HORNED RHINO

2913 (vulnerable)

### WHITE RHINO

About 20 000 (near threatened)

### WESTERN AFRICAN BLACK RHINO

Extinct

### NORTHERN WHITE RHINO

Sub-species (possibly extinct)

## THE GRUESOME SCORE

Rhinos killed in Southern Africa

- 2009: 122
- 2010: 333
- 2011: 448 in South Africa (including 19 critically endangered black rhinos), 200 shot by pseudo hunters, 28 poached in Zimbabwe, 27 poached in Kenya, two poached in Swaziland.  
**Total: 705**
- 2012: 281 in South Africa by end of July, 164 of which have been killed in Kruger. This total is expected to reach 595 by the end of the year. Numbers are increasing almost daily.

### Arrests

- 2010: 165
- 2011: 232, consisting of 194 locals, 24 couriers, 12 buyers, two exporters and no foreign syndicate bosses.
- 2012: 178 poachers in South Africa by end of July, including 10 couriers, six buyers and seven exporters.

### Poachers killed in combat

- 2011: 21





Mitchell Krog



The crack of a rifle in the pre-dawn glow can mean only one thing. Poachers! The Tshokwane field ranger notes its direction and possible position, then radios his section ranger. Within minutes the call comes through to SanParks Environmental Crime Unit. Bruce Leslie, who until that moment has been sitting at his desk chatting amiably, blurs into action.

Out in the park a rhino is dying, its killers waiting with an axe to chop out its horns and make a run for the boundary fence. It doesn't need to be dead for them to begin.

Phones, radio, dogs, choppers – everything at ECI becomes focused on speed and practised efficiency. It will be a combined mission with SanParks, the police and the army. As a chopper thuds down the dogs arrive. Belgian shepherds are the best, according to Leslie, for tracking humans.

His dog, Killer, greets him gleefully, sees the chopper and just about somersaults on its lead with excitement. 'They're working dogs,' he says. 'This is what they live for.'

Within half an hour men in battle-dress and dogs are taking off from Skukuza Airport on yet another mission in a war that's turned nasty, with Kruger National Park at its epicentre. There are an estimated 25 000 rhinos in the world, nine out of 10 of them in South Africa and most in Kruger. Poachers are killing an average of one every 15 hours. It's here that the battle to save the rhinoceros from extinction will be won or lost.

Out in the park  
a rhino is dying, its  
killers waiting with an  
axe to chop out its  
horns. It doesn't  
need to be dead  
for them to begin



The amounts of money involved in this war are staggering. A full-grown rhino carries about eight kilograms of horn, which at black market prices is worth millions. That makes it more valuable per gram than gold or pure heroin. In an attempt to stop the killing, SanParks is pouring R450 million a year into anti-poaching operations. According to Interpol, rhino horn is part of a global, illegal wildlife trade that could be worth up to \$20 billion (about R168 billion) a year. That's more than the GDP of most African countries.

'The park has a 400-kilometre border with Mozambique in the east, a northern border with Zimbabwe and impoverished communities to the west,' said Kruger's chief mammal scientist, Sam Ferreira, when I tracked him down at Skukuza.

'A critical switching point is the minimum wage around here. At some point it's so low that poaching becomes a survival issue. No legal disincentive works when you have no money at all. When that happens, anti-poaching operations tend to shift from legal disincentives to a shoot-to-kill policy. But payment for horn is so high that it's even overcoming the disincentive of death. And when there are no more deterrents you're in serious trouble. I think that's where we're at right now.'

According to the head of SanParks Environmental Crime Unit, Ken Maggs, there are basically five layers to the poaching business: shooters, recruiters, receivers, exporters and consumers. His unit deals mainly with the first two at park and local level, but is also involved in levels three and four.

'At the first level there are several types of poacher,' he said. 'There's the traditional poacher who lives nearby, has excellent bush skills, often has military training and starts dirt poor. Payment for a single rhino hunt can utterly change his life.'

'Then – and more worrying – are wildlife industry poachers: park rangers, vets, pilots, game capture operators,

## THE MEDICINE MYTH

Contrary to popular myth, rhino horn has never been used in traditional medicine as an aphrodisiac. Ground to powder, it's said to reduce inflammation, fever and cancer. It's also a popular post-partying cleanser in Vietnam. Further west, in Yemen, you can hardly call yourself a man unless you own a jambiyya, which is a dagger with a rhino-horn handle.

professional hunters, game farm managers and owners. The cost of a rhino is a fraction of what you can get for its horn, so it could be worth your while to hunt your own rhino. These guys have skill, money and sophisticated hardware.

'Then there are bogus hunters, mostly Vietnamese, who get a legitimate license to trophy hunt but everyone knows the horn will end up on the black market. They've even armed Gauteng prostitutes to up their hunting quotas.'

There's presently a case in the courts where a game farm owner and two vets are charged with killing more than 39 rhinos and selling their horns on the black market. Assets seized included two helicopters, four houses, four farms, a fleet of vehicles and trust accounts; the total worth being about R550 million.



In the chopper with Killer between his knees, Bruce Leslie and the section ranger deploy SADF observers on the eastern boundary, then head for the area where the shot was heard. Their aim is to locate the carcass and track the poachers from there. They don't find the rhino, but the dogs pick up the

spoor and the team moves off silently, firearms ready. The bush is thick, the poachers have weapons and the team is without body armour (it's too hot). Their best protection is that the poachers think they'd be outgunned by SanParks and don't set an ambush. But less-experienced poachers are coming on line and their weapons are getting more sophisticated.

After a few kilometres, four poachers suddenly emerge ahead. One swings his rifle towards the trackers so they fire warning shots and the men scatter. The chopper is radioed and comes in low and fast, pushing them to ground. One is arrested, then two more, but one escapes. After returning the captives to base, the anti-poaching team are back in the helicopters to search for the rhino.

'Either wounded or dead,' says Leslie as he grabs some water and spare radio batteries, 'we'll find it. We get calls like this sometimes three times a day, often every day. We average around twice a week throughout the year. Kruger's almost the size of Israel or Wales – two million hectares – and lots of it is remote. Every minute of every day or night there will be armed poachers in the park. It's a hard war.'

Members of the anti-poaching unit carry some pretty fancy kit in their

281 rhinos had been killed in South Africa by end of July. This is expected to reach 595 by the end of the year

### **TO TRADE OR NOT TO TRADE?**

There's a growing belief in South Africa that the ban on illegal rhino horn trade hasn't prevented the slaughter of a single African rhino. Although trading in rhino horn was banned by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in 1993, followed by China, the practice is still widespread.

There are presently around 250 NGOs 'saving the rhino', almost all of which support the ban on horn trade. Most focus on fundraising and raising awareness, but some conservationists suspect a good few are opportunistic, jumping on the rhino bandwagon to make money.

Defence of hunting, however, has come

from rhino conservationist Ian Player, who was instrumental in bringing the white rhino back from near extinction. He pointed out that in every country where legal hunting was banned, poaching rose sharply.

Legal hunting, he says, made a significant contribution to the recovery of the white rhino population because it was worthwhile for game owners to breed them.

Head of the Wilderness Foundation, Andrew Muir, also warned that a moratorium on hunting could have unintended and negative consequences prejudicial to conservation as a whole.

'Around 23 per cent of rhinos are in private hands,' he said. 'They cost a fortune to support and protect and if there's no

incentive for game owners to keep them, they won't. We could suddenly lose around 5000 rhinos.'

SanParks biologist Sam Ferreira doesn't disagree. 'A quarter of all rhinos in South Africa are in private reserves. But I think it's too soon to lobby to get the ban lifted this year. Africa has to reach a unified position first, then put a watertight case to CITES at the following meeting.'

'But there are dangerous unknowns and unanswered questions. Is the present demand for horn coming from end-users or futures speculators hedging against extinction? And what if some reputable research outfit finds some medical value in rhino horn? It'd be a disaster.'

backpacks, including satellite phones, GPS and powerful rifles, as well as first-aid equipment if men are wounded in a firefight. And the teams are backed by dogs and aircraft. They pack a mean punch if required to.

'We're bound by rules of engagement and don't aim to kill poachers,' said Maggs. 'But they have no rules whatsoever and won't hesitate to shoot at us. We do return fire – around 21 poachers were killed in the park last year. This is organised crime par excellence. There's an enormous amount of money involved.'



Kruger has about 10 500 white rhinos and 630 black which, between them, produce around 1 000 youngsters a year. Because of extra waterholes and good grazing, they breed faster than in a more natural environment.

In the past, Kruger has sold off the 'beyond normal' supply, spreading rhino DNA further afield and raising essential revenue. But that surplus is now falling to poacher guns and the revenue and supply of rhino to other parks and private buyers has dried up.

In Kruger's attempt to halt the slaughter lies a terrible irony. The more successful the park rangers and other anti-poaching initiatives become, the more money poachers have to throw at killing rhinos.

'It's simple economics,' Ferreira pointed out. 'What drives up the price of a commodity? Scarcity. Anti-poaching squeezes the supply

but the demand stays the same, so all that changes is the value of rhino horn. And the incentive to poach and the money available therefore gets bigger and bigger.

'I'm a biologist, but with rhino poaching I've had to rapidly become an economist. And it's been an eye-opener. We can't stop anti-poaching, of course, but I've realised that it's a short-term response – a holding pattern until we sort out the demand end of the chain. We need to understand the drivers at the Asian end to get the whole picture and we don't – not really.'

This realisation has forced organisations such as the National Wildlife Crime Reaction Unit to think more broadly about poaching and the demand end of the equation.

Rhino horn is used for dagger handles in Yemen, but the larger demand is traditional medicine in China and Vietnam. China has been using it for thousands of years and, because of modernisation, could be a declining market.

Southeast Asia is the big problem. Among these countries, Vietnam is a recent market which suddenly expanded when a politician ran a television campaign about how rhino horn cured his cancer.

'The demand was created by aggressive campaigning and social marketing,' said Ferreira. 'In a way there's more hope there, because it means that aggressive social marketing against the use of rhino horn could work. Law may be a disincentive to use rhino horn, but

'We're bound by rules of engagement and don't aim to kill poachers, but they have no rules whatsoever and won't hesitate to shoot'

### WHO ARE THE POACHERS?

Given the black market price of rhino horn (it can sell for up to R1 million a kilo), poaching is inevitable, especially in a country with leaky borders and a reputation for inefficient and sometimes corrupt policing.

University of Cape Town researcher, André Standing, has estimated that there are around 800 crime syndicates operat-

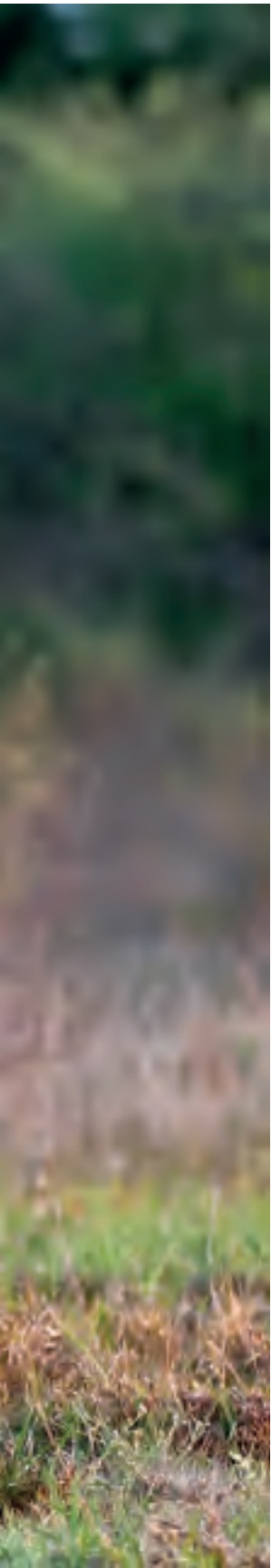
ing in South Africa – 300 of them foreign – usually built around scarce or illegal commodities. From South Africa, they export live animals and plants, elephant tusks, abalone and rhino horn, much of it smuggled out in containers from Cape Town. On the inbound routes come drugs and fake designer clothing. And business is booming.

According to Rodney Visser, head of security at Shamwari Game Reserve, Vietnamese criminal cells appear to have links with members of the country's embassy in Pretoria who have diplomatic immunity and trade in rhino horns and penises, lion bone and pink flamingos, while their Chinese counterparts traffic in abalone and drugs as well as extortion and abduction.



Peter Delaney





it's not as powerful as creating an incentive not to use it. That has to be run by people who understand the Asian market. Until they do that, anti-poaching is just hanging on to the tail of the beast.'

An additional problem is that the demand for horn is possibly not being driven by consumers, but by speculators hedging against rhino extinction. Veteran conservationist Clive Walker has suggested that the trade could be linked to investment and not use, but nobody knows for sure. 'We find ourselves in a position where we know what needs to be done in terms of research into the market ... in the East,' he writes in a new book on rhinos just out, 'but with seemingly no way to do it. The southeast Asians must be part of the debate.'



Back in his office, Leslie is again on standby and relaxed. He's been in the park for more than 20 years and knows it intimately. He tells me that when he's tracking poachers, especially at night, he's more worried about wild animals than men with guns. He relates how he was attacked by a leopard, which grabbed him by the hand as he tried to fend it off. 'It was old and hungry,' he says. 'I can't blame it. I was just food.'

I say it's rather unusual to be putting his life on the line almost every day to protect an animal. He gives me a hard look.

'These animals have been on the planet for 30 million years doing just fine. Then we came along with guns, greed and habitat destruction. Without parks like Kruger there's no hope for rhinos. They could go extinct in my lifetime. What an indictment. We can't let it happen! Not on my watch.'

■ During a search for the rhino and hidden arms at Tshokwane, two of the anti-poaching team were mistaken for poachers and were shot and killed by a ranger. Two more casualties in the rhino war.

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## THE OFFICIAL RESPONSE

The official response to rhino poaching has been mixed. In Kruger, the army has been given the task of protecting the country's international border with Mozambique and assisting rangers and police in the rhino-poaching threat. But for some reason the Endangered Species Protection Unit of the police service was disbanded in 2003 and these days, according to Searl Derman, owner of Aquila Private Game Reserve where three rhinos were poached in 2011, their detection methods are 'a comedy of errors'.

This January, the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Water and Environmental Affairs called for public submissions on the problem. Its chairman, Advocate Johnny de Lange, reserved his toughest grilling for his own department, Environmental Affairs, noting that of the 232 arrests for poaching last year, most were for small fry. Only two exporters were arrested and no buyers. The department failed to supply figures for convictions.

What emerged from the hearings is that there is uncertainty about the number of rhinos, registration is haphazard and DNA sampling is progressing very slowly. In some provinces, such as the North West and Limpopo, administrations are deeply flawed. It's said that a farmer, notifying officials of an intention to dehorn, will have poachers on his property within 24 hours.

In April, however, the Minister of Environmental Affairs, Edna Molewa, cracked down on pseudo hunters. Anyone applying now has to prove membership of a hunting association recognised in the applicant's country, produce proof of their hunting experience and a copy of their passport. All horns of live rhinos sold or transported must be microchipped and a national database established. Taxidermists have to immediately register receipt of heads and horns with the ministry. ■



Keith Connelly